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Soul: today's most authentic American music

By JUAN RODRIGUEZ

Soul music is perhaps the most authentic American music being produced today. It reflects the facts, fantasies and life-style of the black urban population. Soul does not have to be manufactured; its ingredients are already there. This is the quality that makes it so fundamentally different from the rest of pop music, which is usually a hybrid of spare parts, that when properly assembled, will exude "commercial potential." Soul music, by its very nature, is also thoroughly commercial; after all, music offers many blacks an escape from their dismal ghetto environment. But once released from the streets to a night club or a recording studio, the soul singer effectively portrays his life without any compromise in his music for the sake of acceptability. "Tell it like it is" is more than a catch phrase. It is a way of life.

What is soul? It is pointless to try to answer that question here, as everyone has their own theories concerning the subject. Indeed, the definition of soul has become a rather sick little parlour game that simply diverts us from the real joy and fascination of soul music. For now, let's just say that anyone who sings "from the heart" has soul. There are many singers who fit this description, but only a small proportion of them build a whole song totally around its delivery. Quite often the words of a soul song are not particularly outstanding or profound. The themes are simple ones and they are usually interrelated. But soul music is determined in 'how' a singer sings, not 'what' he sings. It is the intimate style and ritualistic drama of soul that makes it one of the most expressive contemporary musical forms.

There are various soul singers whose styles are distinct from one another while remaining within the same framework. Aretha Franklin literally belts out a song while Smokey Robinson's style is accentuated with melody and sophistication. Ray Charles is perhaps the classiest soul artist, having added his own flavour to such hackneyed standards as Yesterday and Making Whoopee. On the other hand, James Brown's performances are strictly theatrical; he acts out each number, going into frenetic routines to prove his point. There are others, such as Wilson Pickett, Martha & the Vandellas, Joe Tex and Stevie Wonder, who combine vocal brilliance with their own brand of showmanship to provide a wonderfully emotive music that reaches everyone who happens to be around.

Because it is such an absorbing music, there is a tendency these days for critics to over-intellectualize soul music. They often forget that it is music designed to entertain. One visit to a club that specializes in soul (in Montreal, the Esquire is tops) will easily prove this point. Guitarist Jorn Reissner accurately pinpoints the appeal of soul music: "It can make you feel so good — no strings attached. If you've listened to Chuck Berry or Smokey Robinson, then you'll know what I mean."

The greatest soul singer of them all was probably Otis Redding. When he died in a plane crash last December, Redding was nearing the peak of his career. His style stamped an indelible imprint on the new generation of soul singers, and his compositions were made famous by such people as Aretha Franklin and the Rolling Stones. Born in Macon, Georgia, Redding performed a brand of music known as "Memphis soul;" his songs were all recorded in Memphis, and his studio band, Booker T & the MGs is, in my view, the finest rock ensemble in the business. Redding picked up where his hero Sam Cooke (killed in a motel in 1964) left off. He soon became popular in two continents; he was acclaimed the top star of 1967 by Britain's "Melody Maker" poll, and he enjoyed even greater success in America.

Two characteristically fine compendiums of Redding at his best are the recent albums The History of Otis Redding and Dock of the Bay (both issued by Volt records). On History all of his hits are there, including Try A Little Tenderness, his finest slow ballad. It is a radical departure from the shuffle tempo with which he is usually associated. Here Redding is relaxed and thoughtful, taking the time to explain a few facts of love and life. On The Glory of Love, Redding starts off slowly as he makes his basic assumptions, "Give a little, take a little, and let your little heart cry a little..." As he progresses the momentum builds up and the song ends on a completely different pace. Redding was a thouroughly accomplished singer and the subtlety of his performances is often overlooked. His fantastic rhythmic qualities are heard in the exciting in-person performance of Shake, and on The Huckle-Buck, which is at first a simple invitation to dance, but is also a tribute to soul music and the places where it is played. Many of Redding's songs are also marked with an easy-going type of humor, especially Tramp, a duet he sung with Carla Thomas. "You got no money, Otis," berates Miss Thomas, "You can't buy me those minks and sables and all those things I want." To this he quickly replies, "I can buy you minks, rats, anything you want . . ."

Otis Redding's biggest hit was Dock Of The Bay, which was released posthumously. It is Redding's sensitive, impassioned delivery of the timeless lyric that makes this song a classic in its field — "Sitting here resting my bones, seems this loneliness won't leave me alone - Two thousand miles I roamed, just to make this dock my home." The irony in Redding's song is complete — and real. Dock Of The Bay was Otis Redding's first million seller, and he never saw it happen.

LUCY: "And all the people will cheer me . . ." imagines Lucy (Cathy Wallace) in the number I'll be a Queen, from the production You're A Good Man, Charlie Brown, now nearing the end of its successful run at Sir George Williams Theatre.

La Poudriere play continues

Jack Crisp's comedy, A Wife in the Hand, will continue its successful run at La Poudriere on St. Helen's Island, for another two weeks.

With Elieen Clifford, Len Watt, Bert Adkins, Michele Chicoine, Scott Savage, Jeanine Beaubien and her daughter Jeannine Jr. in the cast, the all-Canadian production won praise at HemisFair in San Antonio, Texas, before opening in Montreal.

The play runs from Tuesday to Friday at 8.30 p.m., with two performances on Saturday, at 6.30 p.m. and 9.30 p.m. There are no performances on Sunday and Monday.

Micheline Tessier in recital

Micheline Tessier, Canadian soprano and teacher at the Ecole Normale de Musique, will present a recital in the concert hall of the Ecole Normale, 4873 Westmount Avenue, on Tuesday, July 30, at 8 p.m., assisted at the piano by Jean-Pierre Vetter, she will offer a varied program.

In November, Micheline Tessier will undertake a five-week tour of the Soviet Union, where she will appear as guest of several opera houses besides giving recitals. The tour has been arranged as part of the cultural exchange program between Canada and the Soviet Union.

At the New Penelope

Commencing Monday, July 29, until Saturday, August 3, the New Penelope will present Earth Opera, Elektra recording artists from Boston.

Together for over a year, Earth Opera consists of five musicians with backgrounds in bluegrass, jazz, jug band music and rock. From this variety of influences they have created a very original sound. Leader Peter Rowan, formerly lead guitarist for Bill Munroe, is responsible for the group's material.

Appearing at the New Penelope from August 20 to 24 is the Paul Butterfield Blues Band.

Shows are from 9:30 p.m. to 1:00 a.m. on weekdays, and from 9:30 p.m. to 2:00 a.m. on Friday and Saturday.

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